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In mid-October 1969 President Richard Nixon ordered the United States high command to carry out military measures across the globe designed to be "discernible to the Soviet Union but not threatening in themselves." Collectively, these measures constituted a world-wide nuclear alert, which may have been one of the largest secret military operations in U.S. history. Known to insiders as the "Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test," only President Nixon, his special advisor for national security affairs, Henry Kissinger, Kissinger's National Security Council aide, Colonel Alexander Haig, and Nixon's chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, were privy to its underlying policy purpose.

*memo?  
if he had  
known?*

Starting on 13 October U.S. tactical and strategic air forces in the United States, NATO Europe, and East Asia began a stand down of training flights to raise operational readiness; the Strategic Air Command (SAC) increased the numbers of its bombers and tankers on ground alert; and the readiness posture of selected overseas units was heightened. On 25 October SAC took additional steps to increase the readiness of nuclear bombers. Two days later SAC B-52s undertook a nuclear-armed "show-of-force" alert over Alaska. Code-named Giant Lance, it was the first nuclear-armed airborne operation since the disastrous nuclear weapons accident at Thule, Greenland in January 1968. On 28 October, after U.S. intelligence detected signals of Soviet cognizance of the global readiness exercise, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird ordered commanders to terminate it at the end of the month.

The JCS Readiness Test, along with Nixon's orders to launch it, remained secret from much of the government and the public until 1983, when journalist Seymour Hersh reported on one phase of SAC's alert measures and speculated on their policy purpose in his book. Hersh suggested that the nuclear alert was a manifestation of Nixon's threat-strategy against the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, aka North Vietnam) and related in some way to Duck Hook, the bombing operation that Nixon had threatened to unleash against the DRV around 1 November unless Hanoi yielded to Washington's terms in the Paris negotiations. An investigative coup for Hersh, his version of what happened during the alert, however, was brief, fragmentary, and partly in error concerning the details of the operation, its origins, and its purpose. Even so, for inexplicable reasons Hersh's revelation was noted by relatively few scholars and journalists and remembered by fewer.

The declassification of documents about the JCS Readiness Test in the 1990s established its historicity, leading at least one analyst to speculate that it was "an apparent effort to add credibility to the U.S. threat to intervene in a Sino-Soviet conflict." Since then, significant additional documents on the nuclear alert and Nixon-era foreign policy have been released at the National Archives and elsewhere, and former senior Nixon-era officials have been more willing than previously to talk about their knowledge of Nixon-Kissinger policies. The evidence convincingly points to the conclusion that it was carried out for reasons having to do with Nixon's strategy for ending the Vietnam War on terms favorable to America's global, great-power credibility. No direct evidence has turned up supporting the theory of a connection between the alert and the Nixon administration's reaction to the Sino-Soviet border crisis, and some has surfaced that contradicts it. Hersh's interpretation, such as it was, thus stands vindicated in its broad outlines, although the relationship of the alert to Duck Hook is more subtle and indirect than he

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suggested, and its connections with U.S.-Soviet relations more complex and direct than he implied.

The new evidence indicates that the JCS Readiness Test, or nuclear alert, was a concrete military expression of Nixon's and Kissinger's conceptions of credibility, détente, linkage, and the Madman Theory in relation to the Vietnam War. By the time the nuclear readiness measures got under way on 13 October, Nixon had already decided *winning?* to abort the Duck Hook operation. Nixon hoped, however, that these military measures would cause the Soviets and North Vietnamese to think it was a lead-up to Duck Hook, thus jarring them into making the diplomatic compromises demanded by the U.S. The alert had another compensatory purpose. Because Moscow and Hanoi would discover after 1 November that he not carried through with his threats to take measures of great consequence and force against North Vietnam, the alert, he thought, would at least serve to salvage his reputation for toughness and irrationality by reminding the Soviets and North Vietnamese, and especially the Soviets, that he was capable of taking dangerous but unpredictable escalatory steps. The nuclear alert was therefore a bluff directed mainly against the Soviet Union because of what Nixon considered their failure or unwillingness to help the United States solve its Vietnam problem, which he and the Soviets understood to be the administration's foreign policy "problem No. 1."

By the time of his inauguration on 20 January 1969, Nixon believed he was well on the way to fashioning the outlines of a strategic plan that would enable him to extricate American troops from Vietnam, win a release of American prisoners of war, and preserve the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon *win!* and the non-Communist status of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN; aka South Vietnam). In contrast to skeptical antiwar critics, Nixon, Kissinger, and other policymakers believed these specific goals in the Indochina war had a critical bearing on the global position of the U.S. If he failed to avoid defeat in Vietnam, and, particularly, if he were perceived to have abandoned a client and ally to a client and ally of his Moscow adversary, the credibility of America's will and ability to protect other allies and clients against revolutionary upheaval and "Communist aggression" would be undermined, as would America's credibility vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on a range of issues from nuclear arms to Mideast politics.

The emerging American plan for the Vietnam War, which Nixon assembled with Kissinger's assistance, included Vietnamization, de-Americanization, international diplomacy, and negotiations with Vietnamese Communists in Paris *secret plan!* --all coupled with what Nixon referred to in one of his memoirs as "irresistible military pressure." The first and major purpose of Vietnamization was to compensate for de-Americanization, the withdrawal of U.S. forces. But Nixon also thought that Vietnamization and de-Americanization would provide positive and negative incentives for Saigon to hold on and Hanoi to negotiate, while signaling the American public that the war was winding down, which would have the effect of building support for their other Vietnam strategies.

Nixon focused his international diplomatic efforts in 1969 on détente, which he, as well as Kissinger, calculated would enable him to persuade the Soviet Union to lever *wrong* the North Vietnamese into being "reasonable" at the negotiating table in Paris. Détente was not for Nixon simply a matter of relaxing tensions with a formidable nuclear power. As Raymond Garthoff put it, détente was a "strategy to contain and harness Soviet use of



its increasing power" by enmeshing the Soviet Union in "a web of relationships with ... the United States, a web that he would weave." American interests would be served by giving the Soviet Union a stake in the world order.

Nixon attempted to reinforce the deal-making, web-weaving aspect of the strategy of détente with the tactic of "linkage," which in Garthoff's words was a "governing device for applying the incentives and penalties that they placed at the center of their concept of diplomatic strategy." As Nixon told de Gaulle, we need to "make progress on all fronts to achieve a détente." While he expected that the Soviet Union would benefit economically, diplomatically, and militarily by entering his web of relationships, these potential benefits would not become available unless Moscow used its influence to help Washington in reaching a Vietnam settlement. "We should be hard and pragmatic in dealing with the Soviets, Nixon explained to French President Charles de Gaulle on 28 February 1969. "The Soviets ... have great influence on the North Vietnamese," because "85 percent of their weapons came from the Soviet Union." The carrots of linkage were deals on strategic arms, the Mideast, and Berlin--and later, U.S. credits and trade--in exchange for Moscow's cooperation regarding Nixon's prime concern, Vietnam. The sticks included the denial of such agreements in the event of Soviet non-cooperation and various measures that were supposed to add up to irresistible military pressure against North Vietnam, as well the creation of what Nixon called "parallel relations" with both Beijing and Moscow--a diplomatic reference to the "China card."

The strategy of attempting to lever Hanoi by offering favors to or putting pressure on Moscow--and later on Beijing--was also known, of course, as "triangular diplomacy." It was a game that Hanoi and Beijing engaged in as well, with Hanoi playing both the USSR and China cards against the two Communist giants respectively, and Beijing playing the American card against the Soviet Union.

Nixon's strategy for solving his Vietnam problem in 1969 encompassed military as well as diplomatic components. During the first half of 1969 he continued to carry out the ground operations in South Vietnam begun by the last administration, such as pacification and big-unit sweeps, but he additionally envisioned the implementation of ground and air options previously proposed by Vietnam War hawks, the JCS, and some military commanders that had either never been tried or had been halted.

At the core of Nixon's notions about military pressure was a diplomacy-supporting stratagem he called the Madman Theory, or, as he and Haldeman also described it, "the principle of the threat of excessive force." Nixon was convinced that the coercive power of military force would be enhanced if his opponents thought he were capable of or intent upon using force, which others would consider "excessive" in the context of a particular international situation. This, coupled with his political reputation for ruthlessness, would suggest that he was possessed of one or more of the interrelated qualities of madness: irrationality, unpredictability, unorthodoxy, reckless risk-taking, obsession, and fury. The Madman Theory was an undergirding principle not only for Nixon's policy toward North Vietnam but also toward other adversarial states, including the USSR. "The real possibility of irrational American action," Nixon explained in 1970, "is essential to the U.S./Soviet relationship."

Although Nixon was more enamored of this approach than most statesmen, the principle of instilling uncertainty and fear by the threat of excessive force was not new to

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statecraft and had been and remained an inherent component of retaliatory nuclear "deterrent" strategy since World War II. In the 1950s President Dwight D. Eisenhower, his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and his vice president, Richard Nixon, had overtly practiced a version of the Madman Theory by means of the "uncertainty principle" and coercive "brinkmanship" or "massive retaliation." As presidential candidate and president, Nixon continued during and after the 1960s--and despite the Soviet achievement of nuclear equivalence--to associate the overt or implied threat of using nuclear weapons with the Madman Theory of statecraft.

Indeed, as the JCS Readiness Test was underway, Nixon would imply that if he might threaten the use of nuclear weapons, as Eisenhower did during the Korean War, it might force a diplomatic settlement on favorable terms. Nixon believed, as did most members of his party, that Eisenhower's subtle diplomatic threat in May 1953 to use atomic bombs against the Chinese and North Koreans so intimidated the Communists that they subsequently compromised some of their demands at the Panmunjom talks, which then resulted in the July armistice agreement that brought an end to the Korean War. He often spoke of this reputed cause-and-effect as though it were historical fact, which is doubtful.

Nixon continued to entertain notions of nuclear bomb use and nuclear diplomacy after 1969. On 25 April 1972, for example, in the midst of the crisis brought on by Hanoi's Spring Offensive, Nixon would tell Kissinger to consider the "use" of a "nuclear bomb" as an alternative to an air campaign against the North Vietnamese dike system. When Kissinger responded that it would be unnecessarily "too much," Nixon vigorously replied, "I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christ's sake!" In a National Security Council meeting two weeks later, Nixon commented, "Obviously, we are not going to use nuclear weapons but we should leave it hanging over them." rf

In 1969 and afterward Nixon viewed the different elements of his evolving Vietnam plan as an interrelated whole. Expanded conventional military operations would not only have military consequences on the ground and bolster the morale and staying power of the Thieu regime, but they would lend credibility to the Madman stratagem by signaling his willingness and ability to escalate the war. In turn, his threats of using even greater force would bolster linkage and triangular diplomacy, and vice-versa--or so he hoped. Nixon decided upon and implemented these elements in stages, however, as his hopes and fortunes waxed and waned in relation to the vicissitudes of the war in Vietnam and public opinion in the United States.

His first step in carrying out his Vietnam plan was to give qualified approval shortly before his inauguration to the four-party negotiation process arranged by the U.S. and the DRV during the last months of the Johnson administration, in which the U.S., the DRV, the RVN, and the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government, an arm of the NLF) were to meet at the International Conference Center on avenue Kléber in Paris. But these Kléber talks stalled, leading the administration during the summer to take its first tentative steps toward secret negotiations between Kissinger and a North Vietnamese counterpart.

Meanwhile, on 27 January, just seven days after his inauguration, Nixon met with Kissinger, Laird, and General Earl Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, to discuss "the possibility of working out a program of potential military actions which might jar the North



Not in original draft  
(but, "threats" ? clues ?)

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**Vietnamese into being more forthcoming at the Paris talks." The "dramatic steps" outlined in the preliminary draft prepared by the Joint Staff began with a description of their purpose:**

To preclude prolonged stalling tactics by the communists in Paris, a program of military, political, and psychological activities can be employed by the United States to create fear in the Hanoi leadership that the United States is preparing to undertake new highly damaging military actions against North Vietnamese (NVN) territory, installations, and interests.

The preliminary draft did not include proposals for nuclear alerts because military signals to Moscow were not yet on Nixon and Kissinger's Vietnam agenda. They were just beginning to focus on means to encourage the Soviet Union to help with a Vietnam settlement. Interestingly, however, the word "jar"--which encapsulated the principle of threatening excessive force--would reappear months later in reference to the JCS Readiness Test.

Soon implementing other parts of his emerging Vietnam plan, Nixon introduced the concept of linkage at his first meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin on 17 February: "President made clear that progress on political issues [is] bound to have real bearing on progress on arms control.... President hoped that Soviets would show constructive attitude in Middle East talks and do what they could to get Paris Viet-Nam talks off dead-center, since progress in these two areas bound to be helpful in reaching agreement on other issues." To move the Paris talks off dead-center, Nixon launched operation Breakfast on 17 March, a massive B-52 bombing campaign against Communist base areas in Cambodia. Kept secret from the public and most government officials, it was intended as a dramatic signal to "demonstrate to Hanoi that the Nixon Administration is different and 'tougher' than the previous administration"--as a "well-placed" official put it.

The relationship between Nixon's military actions in Indochina, his inclination to send signals of military toughness to his adversaries, and his policies toward the Soviet Union, China, and other Communist states was clearly demonstrated in his and Kissinger's responses to the downing of a U.S. Navy EC-121 reconnaissance plane off the coast of North Korea on 14 April. Both Nixon and Kissinger believed that the shooting down of an American plane by North Korean MiG jets had global implications, presenting a challenge to the credibility of America's will and ability to meet force with force. Nixon therefore felt there was a "need to show [a] strong reaction"; namely, an air strike against the airfield from which the offending MiG interceptors had taken off. When Nixon then consulted key figures in the administration on 16 April about what to do against North Korea, Secretary of State William Rogers, Secretary of Defense Laird, and General Wheeler weighed in against the air strike on the grounds that it might escalate into a war on the Korean peninsula, tax U.S. military resources in Asia, and trigger political opposition at home and abroad. Laird and Rogers may even have threatened to resign should Nixon choose the path of retaliation. Kissinger argued in favor of the strike, maintaining that the Soviets, Chinese, and Vietnamese would all be watching. "If we strike back . . . they will say, 'This guy is becoming irrational--and we'd better settle with him.'" ref ?

Troubled by the opposition of Laird and Rogers and increasingly concerned about the risk of triggering another Korean conflict and the possibility of having to fight two



wars in Asia, Nixon began to waver. Although he continued to believe with Kissinger that he had "to retaliate in some fairly strong fashion," he came to the view that "if we don't retaliate in Korea [soon] we'll have to either find another similar incident in three to four weeks, or go with Operation Lunch," the second phase of the Breakfast operation in Cambodia. Nixon made his decision about what to do on 19 April. It was to cancel the proposed military operation against North Korea but to approve Lunch.

Meanwhile, Vietnamization, the visible centerpiece of Nixon's plan to end the Vietnam war "with honor," was only slowly taking shape. Prodded by Laird and Rogers, Nixon at last ordered the Defense Department on 10 April to prepare timetables for the American troop withdrawals, which were to come about in incremental stages contingent upon the situation on the ground in South Vietnam. At Midway on 8 June Nixon informed a disappointed but unsurprised Thieu of his decision to withdraw 25,000 troops between 1 July and 31 August.

By the time the withdrawals had begun, however, the administration's Vietnam policy had reached a critical juncture. Military signals had not apparently intimidated North Vietnam. Kissinger's efforts at diplomatic linkage had not perceptibly succeeded in persuading Moscow to try to lever Hanoi into yielding on key negotiating points. The talks in Paris were deadlocked, and the antiwar opposition at home was becoming restive. These developments aggravated the long-running disagreement between Kissinger, Laird, and Rogers about the pace and timing of additional troop reductions. Laird and Rogers wanted to accelerate troop reductions; Kissinger did not. Worried that Rogers's and Laird's push for accelerated Vietnamization would bring about a "cop out" by summer 1970, Kissinger was determined to block Vietnamization and "push for some escalation, enough to get us a reasonable bargain for a settlement within six months." It was a plan similar to one he had proposed in April. On 7 July, just before an important strategy meeting on the presidential yacht, he pointed out to Nixon that Vietnamization posed a dilemma: an acceleration of troop withdrawals would discourage Saigon, encourage Hanoi, and weaken Washington's hand in Paris, but a slowdown would disappoint American public opinion and weaken Nixon's political standing at home.

Nixon wrote in his postwar memoirs that he emerged from the meeting intending to "go for broke" in the sense that I would attempt to end the war one way or the other-- either by negotiated agreement or by an increased use of force." Recalling the moment two years later in a conversation with Kissinger, he phrased it more candidly: "I said, all right, we gotta decide now: either stand up or flush it."<sup>2</sup> By this he meant that he perceived his choices to be those of either escalating to force a favorable negotiated agreement or of "escalating for the purpose of accelerating the withdrawal and to protect the Americans when you're getting out." In either case, "we'll bomb the bastards," which was always his visceral inclination.

In July and into August, however, Nixon's feet were not yet firmly planted. Faced with his Vietnamization dilemma, buffeted by conflicting advice, disappointed by his lack of success on the diplomatic front, and aware that public patience was waning, Nixon decided to appease everyone and keep his options open by simultaneously continuing Vietnamization and embarking on military escalation. A final decision on the size of the next increment of troop reductions, however, had to await review, while the



7 *Mary Dobrynin*  
military escalation option called for a two-phased escalation scenario, and, for the time being at least, Nixon chose to go only with the first phase.

As described by an options paper of July-August 1969 prepared by Kissinger aides Winston Lord and Morton H. Halperin, the administration would begin with an escalated campaign of threat designed to frighten the North Vietnamese and also to arm-twist the Soviets into persuading Hanoi to cooperate: *ref?*

We would make clear that our patience was running thin in the face of enemy inflexibility in Paris and the absence of genuine Soviet attempts to move their allies.... If there were not prompt progress in Paris we would conclude that the other side was not prepared to be reasonable without further military pressure. We were prepared not only to exert such pressure but to reconsider our bilateral relations with the Soviets in other fields....

If this aggressive linkage tactic with the Soviets and the accompanying of military escalation against North Vietnam failed, the U.S. could then turn to the of *MHH?*  
dramatic, sudden military pressure.

We would not repeat the process of slow escalation designed gradually to increase the pressure on the enemy to negotiate.... Instead we would move decisively to quarantine North Vietnam through such actions as blockading Haiphong Harbor, resumption of bombing in the north (including close to the Chinese border), and stepped up pressures against third country trade with Hanoi....

Nixon and Kissinger set in motion the enhanced-threat phase of the military-escalation option during July and August. Kissinger met with Dobrynin on 11 July, just four days following the meeting, and warned Dobrynin that Nixon might turn to "other alternatives" against North Vietnam unless Hanoi made concessions in the Paris negotiations. Should this happen, Kissinger hinted, it would likely cause Soviet-American relations to fall to a "dangerous minimum." Four days later Nixon commissioned Kissinger's friend, Jean Sainteny, to deliver to North Vietnamese representatives in Paris a letter from Nixon to Ho Chi Minh calling on him "to move forward at the conference table toward an early resolution of this tragic war." Sainteny was also under instructions to convey an unwritten oral warning from the president to the effect that if by 1 November "no valid solution has been reached, he will regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to measures of great consequence and force." *OLT (NUC?)*

During a diplomatic journey across Asia and Europe, Nixon informed Thieu in Saigon on 30 July that he would send "a warning to Hanoi ... in an unorthodox way"--an allusion perhaps to those diplomatic warnings already given, to those yet to be given, to the implementation of the nuclear alert, or to the threatened bombing of North Vietnam itself. Stopping in Bucharest on this war on a fair basis. It will make possible the many Romanian-U.S. actions we talked about, could make possible U.S.-Chinese relations, and would help relations with the Soviet Union."

**Splitting off from Nixon, Kissinger flew to Paris, where he held his first secret meeting with the North Vietnamese, during which he reminded Xuan Thuy of the earlier warning Sainteny had delivered. At another meeting on the same day, Kissinger told French Foreign Ministry officials that "in the conduct of long range American policy throughout the world it was important that we not be confounded by a fifth rate agricultural power.... It was unthinkable for a major power like the United States to allow**



itself to be destroyed politically.... The North Vietnamese and the NLF should have no illusions about what is ahead."

By mid-August Nixon, Kissinger, and the president's other close advisers, Haldeman, John Mitchell, and John Ehrlichman, believed that for political reasons the administration had to bring the war to a favorable "end ... in six to nine months" but that the "process will be difficult." Soon after returning to Washington from his around-the-world trip, Nixon began to prepare himself for the bureaucratic, political, and international "heat" he believed he would have to endure should he decide to proceed with the resumption of bombing against North Vietnam. Reviewing "Vietnam alternatives" on 18 August, Nixon felt the need to "get ready for what lies ahead" and to make a "total mental commitment." His preparations included a month-long working vacation in San Clemente, while aides developed a public relations campaign that would encourage "strong nationalism" among the public, tout the superb quality of Nixon's foreign policy leadership, and develop "a domestic plan ... covering actions and reaction" to a major bombing operation against North Vietnam.

Within his administration, however, Nixon still faced divided counsel, and friction between top officials about Vietnam strategy contributed to his apprehension. Although unaware of contingency planning for the bombing of North Vietnam, Laird and Rogers were opposed to military escalation and continued to press for accelerated Vietnamization. Concerned about Nixon's resolve, but supported by Haldeman, Mitchell, and Ehrlichman, Kissinger lobbied vigorously against Vietnamization while advocating the second phase of the military escalation option that he predicted would end the war in six to nine months.

According to Haldeman's notes, Nixon reviewed Kissinger's "contingency plan for Vietnam" at the western White House on the night of 28 August. This was probably a reference to the emerging blueprint or "study" for the contemplated military operation against North Vietnam, which was code-named Pruning Knife within the military high command but Duck Hook within the White House and Kissinger's NSC. Nixon had yet to make a final decision whether to go ahead, but planning for the contingency operation moved forward.

An additional spur to go forward with planning, besides the 1 November deadline, was news from the other side of the world: on 30 August Nixon received Ho Chi Minh's reply to his 15 July letter. To the American president's disappointment, the North Vietnamese president rejected Nixon's negotiating terms, put forward his own side's plan for a negotiated solution to the war, and brushed aside Nixon's threats to take measures of great consequence and force. His warnings having failed to intimidate either Hanoi or Moscow, Nixon knew that he would soon have to make a decision about which Vietnam alternative to pursue: actual military escalation or accelerated Vietnamization.

Although the National Archives has not yet released Kissinger's Duck Hook papers, several documents from other Nixon files and archival collections have slipped through the web of agency classifications, and these, along with memoir accounts and journalists' investigative reports, provide a glimpse into the evolution and details of the plan of operation.

In late August or early September Kissinger formed a group of NSC staffers--which some called the "September Group"--who were charged with reviewing the JCS's plan, designing a scenario for what they hoped would be final negotiations, and drafting a

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presidential speech scheduled for 3 November, in which Nixon would announce and defend the launching of Duck Hook. On 9 September Kissinger met with General Wheeler to "discuss military planning for the Duck Hook operation ... and to convey to him the President's personal mandate that planning be held strictly in channels," thereby precluding "discussion of the plan and the ongoing detailed planning with even the Secretary of Defense." By 16 September, if not before, the design of the plan, or the "concept of operations," was complete. It called for the bombing of military and economic targets in and around Hanoi; the mining of Haiphong and other ports; air strikes against North Vietnam's northeast line of communications and passes and bridges at the Chinese border; and air and ground attacks on other targets throughout Vietnam. The September Group, however, continued to debate the plan's efficacy and whether, if it were carried out, certain parts of operation should be included or excluded.

Threat-making accompanied operational planning. During a political meeting with nine Republican senators on 27 September, Nixon staged simultaneous ploys with the senators and Ambassador Dobrynin. With the senators he "planted a story," as he put it, that he hoped would be leaked to the press and "attract some attention in Hanoi," thus having the effect of turning up "the pressure . . . a notch." He told them that he was considering a plan to blockade Haiphong and invade North Vietnam. By prearrangement with Kissinger, and with senators within earshot, Nixon phoned Kissinger, who was meeting with Dobrynin, and instructed him to tell the Soviet ambassador that Soviet cooperation on Vietnam was essential before a dangerously uncontrollable process unfolded. Having told Dobrynin that "Vietnam was the critical issue," Kissinger now repeated the words Nixon used on the phone, that "the train had left the station and was heading down the track." Dobrynin replied that "he hoped that it was an airplane and not a train and would leave some maneuvering room." Kissinger responded that the president "chooses his words very carefully and that [he] was sure he meant train." In his post-conversation summary for Nixon, Kissinger concluded, "I believe the Soviets are concerned and now more clearly understand that we mean business on the Vietnam issue."

Despite his and Kissinger's show of resolve, Nixon was in reality undecided on the course to pursue in Vietnam, and during September he see-sawed back and forth between options, hedging his bets. Four days after a "big meeting" of the National Security Council on 12 September, for example, Nixon announced an additional withdrawal of 40,000 troops by mid-December, which, coupled with the previous August withdrawal, totaled 65,000. Although the reductions did not amount to accelerated Vietnamization, they were almost exactly the number Laird had originally recommended in mid-March for the year 1969.

Having temporarily mollified Laird and public opinion by announcing troop reductions and holding open the accelerated Vietnamization option, Nixon several days later concluded, however, that "the long route can't possibly work," because "the doves and the public are making it impossible to happen." Hence, he needed to go through with "the tough move," Duck Hook.

But even as planning for Duck Hook moved forward, Nixon's resolve in favor of the tough option slowly melted in the heat produced by several pressures, developments, and portents: Laird's and Rogers' opposition to military escalation; the reservations about

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Duck Hook's potential effectiveness by planners in the September Group; declining public support for the war as indicated in opinion polls; signs of political slippage in press editorials and Congressional opposition to Nixon's nominees and proposals; continuing North Vietnamese diplomatic steadfastness but lowered enemy-initiated fighting in South Vietnam; Soviet non-cooperation; and, not the least, the resurgence of antiwar demonstrations.

Three major antiwar actions were scheduled for October and November: the Moratorium for 15 October and the second Moratorium and new Mobilization Against the War for 13-15 November. Nixon's concern was that they would erode confidence in his leadership and blunt the impact of Duck Hook upon Hanoi. His own misperceptions about the prospect for antiwar violence contributed to his anxiety. Coming before Duck Hook commenced, he thought, the October Moratorium might make it appear that he was "making the tough move after the 15<sup>TH</sup> because of the rioting at home." Then, in the days following Duck Hook's launching on 1 November and leading up to the Moratorium and Mobilization in November, "horrible results" might be produced by the build up of "a massive adverse reaction" among demonstrators--although he thought the wider public would take a "dimmer view" of the protesters after the bombing began. If he moved up the date of Duck Hook to before 15 October to "nip" the protests in the bud, however, Kissinger warned that it would "confuse" the North Vietnamese and "look as if we tricked them."

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On 3 October at Key Biscayne Nixon met with Kissinger and Haldeman to evaluate the remaining alternatives. Kissinger presented stark choices, arguing that the only two courses were a "bug out" (accelerated Vietnamization) or escalation (Duck Hook), without which, he said, the president "is lost." Nixon believed, however, that he was "lost anyway if that fails, which it well may." Kissinger countered that the only question is "whether P can hold the government and the people together for the six months it will take." But that was precisely the rub for Nixon, since "it's obvious from the press and dove buildup," Haldeman noted, "that trouble is there whatever we do."

Nixon would "talk through alternatives" about "overall strategy" on 11 October, but it was most probably on 6 October that he finally decided against Duck Hook. Nixon, Haldeman reported, "did not yet rule out K's plan as a possibility" for another time, "but [he] does now feel [the] Laird-Rogers plan is a possibility," mainly because of lowered enemy activity and reduced U.S. casualties. The president's "worry about K's plan," Haldeman added, "is that it will take six to eight months and fears [he] can't hold the country that long at that level, where[as] he could hold for some period of withdrawals." Now, Nixon's televised speech to the nation, scheduled for 3 November and originally drafted as an announcement and defense of Duck Hook, would be re-written as an attack on his domestic and foreign opponents and an appeal for the American public's support of his Vietnam strategy.

withdrawal?

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On 9 October, just as he was beginning to oversee the readiness test, Haig, using mixed metaphors, wrote to Kissinger, summing up the situation: Certainly our cards should have been played after October 15 unless we believed serious upheavals were going to come on the 15<sup>TH</sup> here at home.... Obviously the fat is now in the fire and the game has started but our chips are already considerably lower than they might have been.

What not decided  
after Oct 15 -  
over?



"Our cards" was a reference to Duck Hook itself; "the game" was the 1 November ultimatum and the threats and preparations associated with it; the remaining stack of "chips" was the readiness test; and "fat in the fire" referred to the question of whether the Soviets would acquiesce in pressuring Hanoi or call the administration's bluff.

Although keeping his military options open, Nixon was now embarked on another path. Having cancelled Duck Hook, he recalled in his memoir that he "began to think more in terms of stepping up Vietnamization while continuing the fighting at its present level rather than of trying to increase it." He acknowledged, however, that "it was important that the Communists not mistake as weakness the lack of dramatic action on my part in carrying out the ultimatum." In the future, he wrote, "we would be able to demonstrate our continuing resolve to the North Vietnamese on the battlefield," but in October "the Soviets would need a special reminder."

Nixon did not directly reveal it in his memoir, but that special reminder was the JCS Readiness Test. Presumably more will be learned about Nixon's decision when any meeting notes and daily diaries that Henry Kissinger prepared become available to historians. Nevertheless, there is ample documentation to confirm that Vietnam, not China, was on Nixon's mind when he initiated the readiness test by telephoning Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on the evening of 6 October. In Alexander Haig's language, the president asked Laird to order U.S. military forces to take a "series of increased alert measures designed to convey to the Soviets an increasing readiness by U.S. strategic forces."

The most striking piece of evidence confirming that Vietnam considerations shaped the readiness test can be found in an entry for 17 October of a discussion with Henry Kissinger in the manuscript version of Bob Haldeman's journals and diaries. The entry was classified at the time of the publication of the print and electronic versions of in 1994:

K has all sorts of signal-type activity going on around the world to try to jar Soviets and NVN. Appears to be working because Dobrynin asked for early mtg, which we have set secretly for Monday. K thinks this is good chance of being the big break, but that it will come in stages. P is more skeptical.

On the same day, Kissinger and Nixon met with Sir Robert Thompson to discuss his "plan for ending [the] Vietnam [war]." Nixon told Thompson that he "felt that the USSR was not presently exercising its influence, but as in the case of the Korean war, might possibly do so if there were incentives on the 'negative side'"--an allusion to Eisenhower's nuclear threat against China in 1953. Throughout the discussion Nixon and Kissinger argued that the Soviets did "not want" and "had a fear" of confrontation, which suggested that they believed they could impose a negative incentive, such as Duck Hook or nuclear alert measures, without fear of Soviet counteraction.

In recent interviews former Secretary of Defense Laird confirmed that when Nixon ordered the alert measures, he was recalling the applicability of Eisenhower's Korean War strategy to Vietnam. Laird summed up Nixon's thinking this way: Nixon did it because of Soviet aid to North Vietnam--to alert them that he might do something. This was one of several examples of the Madman Theory.... He never used the term "madman," but he wanted adversaries to have the feeling that you could never put your finger on what he might do next. Nixon got this from Ike, who always felt that way.

?!

CHECK  
whether he  
says this!

this  
contributes  
(certainly  
does not  
support)  
assertion  
N and  
decided  
against  
D.H. on  
Oct 6!

Oct 12!



Kissinger explained the relationship between "signal-type activity" and his and Nixon's attempt to coerce Moscow into helping them solve their Vietnam problem in memoranda he wrote to Nixon before and after their meeting with Dobrynin on 20 October. In briefing papers Kissinger sent to Nixon on 18 October, for example, he linked the nuclear alert to their 27 September warning to Dobrynin about the "train leaving the station" when he conjectured that Dobrynin's 17 October request for a meeting on 20 October "comes against the background of several developments, including...Moscow's undoubted awareness of unusual military measures on our part, preceded by the stern comments made to Dobrynin on September 27." He reminded Nixon that in their forthcoming 20 October meeting with Dobrynin "will be to keep the Soviets concerned about what we might do around November 1" and also "make clear that ... unless there is real progress in Vietnam, U.S.-Soviet relations will continue to be adversely affected." Alerting Nixon that the Soviet ambassador might raise the subject of "our current military measures," Kissinger suggested that he should, in oblique diplomatic language, cooly reply that they were "normal exercises relating to our military readiness." In sum, Nixon and Kissinger were hoping that the "unusual" readiness test, or nuclear alert, would serve to persuade the Soviets to help them force concessions out of the North Vietnamese.

*did HAK confirm  
the language?  
(not in his  
memo)*

After Nixon asked Laird on the evening of 6 October for measures that would "convey to the Soviets an increasing readiness by U.S. strategic forces," the Secretary of Defense passed the request on to his military aide, Colonel Robert E. Pursley, who began hastily to improvise a response. The next morning, Pursley called Kissinger's military assistant, Col. Alexander Haig, to tell him that he was sending a "plan for increased SAC alert." The paper that Pursley sent over plainly disappointed Haig who later reported to Kissinger that it was "merely a resume of an already approved East Coast air defense exercise, which was not responsive to the President's instructions."

Probably wondering whether Laird's office was sufficiently enthusiastic about Nixon's request, Haig asked Pursley for more impressive measures, telling him that the White House wanted military measures that the Soviets would consider "unusual and significant" but not "threatening," but at the same time would not be expensive, not require allied approval, "not degrade essential missions," and have a "minimal chance of public exposure." By the next day, Pursley responded with a list of actions that, to varying degrees, met Haig's criteria. Pursley suggested: (1) communications silence, (2) a stand down of combat aircraft (e.g., cessation of training flights), (3) increased reconnaissance operations around the Soviet periphery, (4) increased ground alert rates for SAC bombers and tankers, (5) dispersal of SAC aircraft with nuclear weapons to designated military around the country, and (6) alerting/sending to sea of ballistic missile-submarines (SSBN). In addition, Pursley suggested increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to Vietnam, which underlined the central relevance of the Vietnam problem to Nixon's decision. Such actions, he suggested, could be easily detected by the Soviets without being noticed at home, be executed by 13 October (the following Monday), and last "sufficiently long to be convincing." Pursley also informed Haig that he had asked the Joint Staff to develop detailed plans for each of the proposed measures.

The next day Pursley sent Haig a paper identifying the pros and cons of each of the suggested measures. Some of the proposals, such as increased reconnaissance sorties,



were clearly risky because of a greater risk of Soviet "shoot-down," while others, such as dispersal of SAC aircraft to military dispersal bases "could be publicly alarming." Less provocative measures, such as stand down of flying of combat aircraft and increased ground alert rate of SAC bombers, would be considered "significant" by the Soviets. On the "con" side, they could have a disruptive impact on routine U.S. Air Force operations; for example, it would be difficult to maintain increased ground alert "for weeks without strain on air crews." The proposed increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to Vietnam would be a "significant departure from current operations" but it raised the risk of collision at sea and "could provoke Soviet charges to interference with shipping on high seas."

While the Joint Staff went to work on the details, that same day, 9 October, Nixon took action. Kissinger passed Pursley's first list to Nixon and recommended radio silence, aircraft stand down, increased surveillance of Soviet shipping, higher alert rates for SAC aircraft, and dispersal of SAC bombers, "phased appropriately through the week." Kissinger did not approve increasing aerial reconnaissance operations near Soviet territory and raising alert levels of SSBNs might be too provocative or too hard to conceal (although measures involving SSBNs would later come into play). Kissinger soon met with Nixon, who signed off on the steps recommended by his assistant. Haig quickly called Pursley and asked him for a detailed plan and implementing instructions.

Deep secrecy was the corollary of Haig's stipulation that the alert measures have "minimal chance of public exposure." If the measures leaked to the press and the public learned about the measures, the reaction could have been adverse--apprehension about saber rattling could have augmented the Vietnam war protests. Leaks to the press about the alert would have raised questions about Nixon's Vietnam policy and the problems with the Soviet Union. Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig may also have seen secrecy as useful for protecting Soviet prestige; they might have reasoned that if the measures leaked to the public, the Soviet leadership may have found it necessary to react with counter-measures with unpredictable consequences. Thus, from the White House perspective, secrecy was essential to prevent serious instability in U.S.-Soviet relations.

Given the emphasis on secrecy, only a small number of individuals in the U.S. government knew about the alert measures and why Nixon wanted them. At the White House only Nixon, Kissinger, Haig, and Haldeman were in the circle of knowledge. Apparently, NSC staff experts on Vietnam and Soviet affairs were not told about Nixon's decision. At the Pentagon, only Laird, Pursley, and JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler may have had the full picture. Secretary of State Rogers and Undersecretary Richardson may not have learned about the readiness measures until 13 October (if even then), when the readiness measures were getting under way. Although NSC relations with the State Department were steadily deteriorating, even Haig believed that Rogers and Richardson had to be told though they "will most probably strongly object." Unless they were informed, "feedback will most certainly come immediately through State channels." In other words, some government, such as a NATO ally, was likely to notice heightened military activities and lodge a question with a U.S. ambassador. Haig further observed that "I do not believe Rogers or Richardson will forgive our failure to keep them informed," and that the White House would face criticism if the press learned that State had been shut out.



Whether Rogers or Richardson learned about the readiness test remains unknown. Rogers was already on record as opposing escalatory military measures in Vietnam and would have probably objected to military measures that risked a wider escalation. Perhaps Haig expected that Rogers would argue that the readiness test was unlikely to influence Moscow's Vietnam policy and, if anything, could confuse the Soviets about U.S. intentions and perhaps spark a confrontation. Certainly, Secretary of Defense Laird's military aide, General Pursley, recalls such concern at the time. Laird failed to see how alert measures would have any impact on Moscow's relationship with Hanoi. For Pursley, "an alert posture would only cause consternation" in Moscow. "It was wrong to push sticks through the bar at a caged animal; that was not in our strategic interest."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff would oversee the alert and Laird quickly brought JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler into the planning. On 10 October, Wheeler notified the CINCS of seven unified and specified commands, including the Commanders-in-Chief of the Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC), European Command (CINCEUR), Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Southern Command (CINCSO), Strike Command (CINCSTRIKE), Alaska Command (CINCAL), and North American Air Defense Command (CINCONAD) that "higher authority"--President Nixon--had directed the high command to "institute a series of actions" during 13-25 October to "test our military readiness in selected areas world-wide to respond to possible confrontation by the Soviet Union." According to Wheeler, "these actions should be discernible to the Soviets but not threatening in themselves." They would include stand down of flight training, radio/communications silence, increased ground alert rate for SAC, and greater surveillance of Soviet ships bound for North Vietnam. Wheeler informed the commanders that some commands had already received specific instructions on a stand down training of flights and the introduction of "varying degrees of electronic emission controls" (EMCON).

Reflecting the degree of secrecy surrounding the exercise, Wheeler did not explain to the CINCs that he had learned that Kissinger wanted to "demonstrate convincingly to the Soviet Union that the United States is getting ready for any eventuality on or about 1 November 1969" and that the United States should demonstrate its "readiness to react should a confrontation occur." Perhaps because the White House decided that talk of "confrontation" was too dangerous, Wheeler toned down subsequent messages by omitting such references and noting that the actions were to be regarded as a "test." From then on, the series of readiness actions requested by Nixon became known as the "JCS Readiness Test" or the "Increased Readiness Posture Test."

On 10 October, Wheeler also sent the CINCS specific instructions. CINSAC was to initiate a stand down of flying and alert activities on 13 October. To give the appearance of intensified readiness activity, other CINCS--CINCONAD, CINCSTRIKE, CINCPAC, and CINCEUR--were to initiate stand downs on 15 October. In addition, to show "unusual fleet activity," CINCEUR was to order the Mediterranean Sixth Fleet to impose EMCON to the extent consistent with safety. CINCPAC would stand down U.S. air forces based in Korea as well as increase ground alert for U.S. air forces there assigned on nuclear missions. By coincidence CINCLANT had plans to send SSBNs to sea on 14, 16, and 17 October, which he saw as a "fortuitous" reinforcing move. CINC

\* Hyp: In case, on Oct 16, N decided to go ahead & (W) 13 Oct? W never removed 1 new date to SU.

W?



Wheeler also asked the CINCs for suggestions on other actions that were compatible with the initial guidance as well as with Pentagon budgetary restrictions.

Laird briefed Nixon and Kissinger on these activities on 11 October. In the meantime, SAC began to prepare to implement Wheeler's instructions. Beginning 8:00 A.M., Monday, 13 October, SAC was to cancel tactical training flights so that more planes were on the ground ready for action, and to put as many nuclear bombers and tankers on ground alert as possible. Wheeler's order excluded forces assigned to Vietnam War missions; unmentioned in his directive were intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) forces, such as SAC's Minuteman deployments. The chairman did not order changes in Minuteman missiles' readiness posture because they were routinely on a high state of alert, ready for launch on warning. If Nixon wanted a "show of force" that Moscow would notice, SAC bombers were the best instruments for that purpose because their alert status could be visibly heightened.

*Test  
Launch?*

Following his orders from Wheeler, on 12 October CINCSAC Holloway instructed over forty SAC commanders to begin the stand down the next day. He also instructed commanders to reinstate "degraded aircraft alert sorties", that is, raise the number of bombers and tankers on ground alert. Under procedures that had been in effect since the early 1960s, SAC was supposed to maintain 40 percent of each squadron--six aircraft for each fifteen--on ground alert ready to strike Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) targets if early warning sensors detected a missile or bomber attack. But shortages of bomber crews, largely due to Vietnam War commitments ironically, had forced SAC to reduce, or "degrade," the number of bomber and tanker "sorties" on alert. Thus, while the latest revision of the SIOP required a ground alert force of 202 bombers (170 B-52s and 32 B-58s) and some 182 KC-135 tankers, as of September 1 actual ground alert bomber and tanker forces totaled 110 and 130 respectively, substantially below SIOP requirements. If there had been a real emergency, SAC would have taken between four to six hours to staff the degraded alert sorties. Given the personnel shortage, canceling flight training was essential for any effort to increase the numbers of aircraft on ground alert.

When SAC began the stand down on 13 October, it increased forces on ground alert to 144 B-52s, 32 B-58s, and 189 KC-135s. That was still below the 40 percent SIOP requirement, but close enough. While Alexander Haig believed that an increase in the ground alert rate could be reached "without undo costs and risks," General Wheeler deflected any White House pressure on SAC. Nevertheless, to ensure that Moscow noticed the Readiness Test, SAC would try to bring more nuclear-armed aircraft into it.

Other U.S.-based commands with nuclear-capable air forces expanded the scope of the Readiness Test. CINCSTRIKE ordered its air combat arm, the Tactical Air Command, to begin a stand down of flying operations on 15 October. Pilots at TAC bases around the country stopped flying nuclear-capable aircraft--F-105 Thunderchiefs and F-4 Phantoms--as well as C-130's used for tactical airlift operations. During the stand down TAC cancelled 4,216 scheduled sorties, using the spare time to raise the combat ready status of aircraft. Also joining the stand down were CINCAL's and CINCONAD's air defense forces, which included aircraft armed with Falcon and Genie nuclear air-to-air missiles, as well as BOMARC nuclear surface-to-air missiles.

By 15 October forces assigned to CINCEUR, including United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), United Army Europe (USAREUR), and U.S. Navy Europe



(USNAVEUR), were participating in the readiness test. Following orders from CINCEUR General Andrew J. Goodpaster, U.S. forces tightened security around bases in Europe and stood-down flying activity of air units. USAFE alone had a formidable force of nuclear-armed and nuclear-capable tactical aircraft, including F-4 Phantoms, at his disposal deployed at bases across Europe from the United Kingdom to Turkey. By 19 October, with the stand down in effect, those forces had obtained an average operational readiness rate of 94 percent. In addition, Goodpaster had ordered the Sixth Fleet to enact controls over communications otherwise keeping ship movements on schedule.???? Finally, CINCPAC received orders to instruct component forces to join the Readiness Test. On 15 October, activities by South Korea-based units of the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) were standing-down training flights and increasing numbers of aircraft slated for "SIOP alert."

The CINCs who presided over the readiness test could only puzzle why the White House had requested the exercise. When CINCSAC General Holloway called the Pentagon for more information, for example, he learned nothing. Correctly believing that Henry Kissinger was involved in the operation, senior officers at SAC headquarters speculated over a possible connection to the Vietnam negotiations in Paris and noted the return of U.S. negotiators to Washington for consultation as well as Nixon's announcement that he would make a major address on Vietnam on 3 November. Lack of knowledge about the alert's purpose made it difficult for operational planners at SAC, among other commands, to respond to JCS requests for suggestions on possible actions for the readiness test; they could only wonder whether their proposals were even relevant.

**To ensure the operational secrecy that the White House wanted, the Pentagon imposed strict requirements on the services. Initially, and on the assumption that something would leak to the public, the JCS's guidance authorized public affairs specialists to respond to media queries with the flat statement that "we are merely testing current readiness posture." But the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs weighed in with more rigorous guidance prohibiting any public announcement of the exercise and forbidding any response to questions unless specifically permitted. The Pentagon's public affairs officers soon relaxed the latter restriction by allowing officials to answer queries with this statement: "We do not comment on readiness tests." Questions, however, never arose.**

Consistent with the secrecy requirements, the readiness measures would not be accompanied by any changes in the Defense Readiness Condition (DEFCON) of U.S. forces. Initial instructions to the Tactical Air Command (TAC) ordering the readiness posture, for example, "indicated [that] an increase in DEFCON (exercise or actual) would not be declared." Ordinarily, higher alert postures were accompanied by messages indicating a change in DEFCON status, which would have involved a host of measures that were burdensome for the U.S. military as well as visible to the public. To ensure that the readiness measures remained as covert as possible, the higher readiness posture had to be separated from a change in DEFCON status.

As SAC and other commands were taking steps to stand down and place air and naval forces on a higher state of readiness, one senior commander argued for the importance of consulting allies. Wearing two hats as CINCEUR and as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Andrew Goodpaster believed that he should



inform NATO about the USAFE stand down in progress, not least because under NATO procedures ordering a stand down unilaterally would raise questions from allies and pose "serious problems." No doubt Haig believed the contrary, that telling NATO anything could risk leaks and jeopardize operational ??

On 14 October Haig told Kissinger that Laird had become "reluctant" to proceed further with the readiness measures. Possibly stalling out of concern over the risks, not only was he supporting Goodpaster's request, Laird had another objection: the readiness test would interfere with an already scheduled secret nuclear command post exercise, High Heels. An annual exercise that had begun in the early 1960s, High Heels involved the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CINCs, and the State Department, among other agencies, around the world. The scenario for the "High Heels 69" exercise posited a series of Soviet aggressive moves leading to a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the United States and the "exercise" of U.S. nuclear war plans in retaliation. The Joint Staff and some of the CINCs believed that carrying out and supervising such a complex nuclear exercise while implementing readiness measures would overload communications and decision-making systems. Other concerns were that the intelligence agencies would have difficulty differentiating between Soviet reactions to the alert measures and the High Heels exercise.

Haig discovered another obstacle to Nixon's instructions: JCS Chairman Wheeler was not pressing SAC to disperse bombers and tankers to specified military bases. Since the late 1950s, SAC had plans to disperse its bomber force to civilian and military bases during periods of increased tension to minimize their vulnerability to attack. SAC's high command, however, recommended against significant dispersal for the readiness test because of the "serious shortage of aircraft crews." The shortage was such that if there was to be a major international crisis, SAC would have to make a choice between dispersing forces and putting other bombers on airborne alert--the maximum condition of readiness before receiving attack orders. Whether Haig was familiar with those arguments or not, he encouraged Kissinger to press for action on dispersal when he met with Laird and Wheeler on 14 October.

Also under dispute between the White House and the Pentagon was the proposal for increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to North Vietnam. Wheeler also wanted to hold that measure in abeyance because of its expense and its ramifications--no doubt the objections noted by Pursley: the dangers of an incident and the likelihood of Soviet charges of interference with shipping. The U.S. Navy, among other military and intelligence agencies, already routinely monitored Soviet shipping to Vietnam; Wheeler may have felt that was enough. Haig, however, suggested that Kissinger to "encourage" Laird to take action on surveillance.

On High Heels and NATO consultations, among other areas of divergence, Haig advised Kissinger on 14 October that Laird's objections were "not overriding." Nevertheless, Laird was a powerful figure in the government, which made it necessary for Kissinger to get the president's support for the necessary "tail twisting." Kissinger would meet with Nixon that morning and was already scheduled to meet with Laird and Chairman Wheeler to adjust High Heels and the alert measures so as to ensure their implementation. Haig believed that "it was necessary to have the measures completed sufficiently before 3 November for the president to ascertain beyond a doubt whether or not the signals have been effective." In other words, before Nixon finished work on his



speech, he had to know whether the alert measures had an impact on Moscow's Vietnam policy.

No record of the discussion with Laird and Wheeler is available but Kissinger must have received authority to "twist" tails because Laird agreed to modify High Heels so that it would not complicate the readiness test. For the first time, the Pentagon limited High Heels to the "Washington area alone," leaving the CINCs free to concentrate on the readiness test. As for the problem of NATO consultations, Haig recommended that Goodpaster could tell any inquisitive allies that a stand down was an "additional aspect of the High Heels operation." Whether Goodpaster received such instructions or whether NATO officials asked about the USAFE stand down remains unknown.????If Kissinger, however, tried to push Laird and Wheeler on the issue of SAC dispersal or surveillance of Soviet ships, he acquiesced because Wheeler did not push either of those issues, although the question of ship surveillance would resurface.

On several of the measures that the White House sought--increased surveillance of Soviet shipping, dispersal of SAC bombers, and higher alert rates--General Wheeler and the CINCs pointed to political and resource problems (crew shortages) that made them inadvisable. Although they did not intend to dilute the signals that Nixon and Kissinger wanted, their objections could have had that effect.

At the meeting with Kissinger, Wheeler received instructions about the duration of the readiness test because on 14 October he informed the CINCS that the readiness posture test would last until the first minute of 30 October. SAC forces would be on heightened ground alert for over three weeks. Exactly how long the alert would last would depend on the timing of Soviet reactions. At some point on or after 10 October, it had been decided--who made the decision is unknown--that these activities would "continue until our intelligence indicates that the Soviets have become aware of the increased readiness." To make such a decision possible, Wheeler had established a special intelligence watch to look for information suggesting that Moscow was aware of the U.S. alert.

To intensify the military signals to the Soviets, the Pentagon and the White House approved new air, ground, and sea-based readiness measures for implementation in Europe, the Near East, East Asia and the Pacific, and North America. Wheeler also allowed a temporary relaxation of the stand down to meet Air Force concerns about flight training. Meanwhile, Kissinger hoped that Dobrynin's request for a meeting meant that the alert was having an effect on Moscow, but the Soviets remained unresponsive to Nixon's pressure.

**Since 10 October, when the CINCs received the first JCS message on the readiness posture, they had been forwarding suggestions for additional military actions to Chairman Wheeler. Within a few days, the Joint Staff had sifted through and digested the advice and on 17 October Wheeler forwarded new instructions to the CINCs designed to signal, with mounting intensity, increased US readiness.**

Significant details of Wheeler's instructions, especially those concerning nuclear weapons, remain classified. Nevertheless, their clear purpose was to intensify the readiness test, making it even more apparent to Soviet intelligence. Thus, the Strike Command received orders to direct its Middle East naval arm, Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR) to deploy destroyers and destroyer escorts to the Gulf of Aden to



conduct multiple ship exercises, while CONAD was to keep its forces on alert and join CINCAL in increasing air interceptor deployments. Wheeler instructed the Atlantic Command to order the heavy cruiser U.S.S. , and a hunter-killer anti-submarine warfare group led by the aircraft carrier, U.S.S. to rendezvous in the North Atlantic with EMCON in effect. Moreover, two other aircraft carriers, the U.S.S. (with EMCON in effect) and the U.S.S. , were to leave ports in Virginia and Florida respectively and steam at high speed to points in the Western Atlantic. CINCLANT would also stand down air patrol activities in the North Atlantic as well as flight training between 25 and 30 October. Following JCS instructions, CINCEUR directed the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) to increase surveillance and intelligence gathering at the East-West German border. Moreover, USAREUR was to increase surveillance of the Soviet Military Liaison Mission (SMLM) that monitored U.S. forces in West Germany.

Wheeler's instructions to CINPAC reflected detailed suggestions from CINCPAC Admiral John McCain. Some particulars remain classified but a major objective was to "enhance naval SIOP forces" by keeping at sea as many nuclear-missile submarines as feasible, among other measures (presumably including increased readiness for nuclear-capable carrier aircraft). Moreover, CINCPAC was to order subordinate units to extend the PACAF stand down to training flights in Japan and Okinawa, to increase the readiness of conventionally-armed tactical and air defense aircraft and missile systems, and to increase local security and anti-sabotage surveillance at bases in Japan and Korea. In addition, forces assigned to PACOM were to increase "intelligence watch" of Soviet forces through the region, except for Southeast Asia.

Admiral McCain also revived the proposal for the surveillance of Soviet ships en route to North Vietnam. Following the CINCPAC's suggestion, Wheeler directed him, beginning 21 October, to monitor those Soviet ships as well as any en route to the Bering Sea. To meet these goals, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet [CINCPACFLT] directed Task Force 71--the nuclear-armed aircraft carrier USS and a number of destroyers--already conducting anti-aircraft warfare and striking force exercises in the Sea of Japan to extend its operations until 25 October. The Task Force would conduct aerial surveillance of Soviet ships, as well as raise operational readiness of air defenses and missiles, although reports on any specific monitoring activities are not yet available.

Wheeler's instructions also included a modification of the stand down because of the burden it had imposed on flight training. He authorized the CINCs to relax the stand down temporarily during the period 18-25 October. The Commands could resume "selective" flying training although flights were to be held to the "the minimum commensurate with critical requirements." Thus, SAC's heightened ground alert posture was to remain in effect.

Besides ordering a partial respite from the stand down, on 17 October Wheeler gave SAC new instructions drawing on suggestions from General Holloway. Thus, when SAC resumed the stand down on 25 October, it would also place additional aircraft in the "highest state of maintenance readiness." They would be "EWO [Emergency War Order] Configured"; that is, equipped with nuclear weapons but not on ground-alert status or assigned with crews with combat mission folders (target lists) on board. Maintenance readiness was a less demanding alternative to ground alert; it raised SAC's readiness posture without further straining the crew-shortage problem, thus tacitly meeting White House interest in a larger-scale nuclear alert.



Besides ordering increased maintenance readiness, Wheeler approved Holloway's recommendation for a "Show of Force" by SAC nuclear bombers. This would involve an airborne-alert exercise of the Selective Employment of Air and Ground Alert [SEAGA] system. Before January 1968 SAC had continuously flown nuclear-armed B-52 to safeguard its bomber force from surprise attack. The Command terminated airborne alert missions, however, after the January 1968 nuclear weapons accident near Thule airbase in Greenland, and replaced them with SEAGA a few months later. SEAGA was to provide decision makers with a rapid-reaction combat force that was geared to attacking urban-industrial targets--SIOP "Task Charlie." Units assigned to SEAGA were to undertake "Task Charlie" while other nuclear forces would undertake SIOP "Task Alfa"--nuclear threat targets--and "Task Bravo"--other military targets outside of urban areas.

SAC could execute SEAGA operations, code-named "Giant Lance," in various configurations. One of the most intense was a "Show of Force"; designed as a "visual deterrent," it called for airborne and ground alert bombers to switch positions at twenty-hour intervals for up to thirty days.?????Wheeler ordered a SEAGA "Show of Force" operation to begin late in the day on 26 October. SAC bombers and tankers would fly the "Eielson East orbit," referring to Eielson air base in east-central Alaska (south of Fairbanks).

**The Pentagon kept Henry Kissinger apprised of the latest instructions, although it rejected as an unnecessary complication his proposal, for the readiness test, to send a carrier task force farther north into the Tonkin Gulf. Kissinger believed that the test was already having an impact on Moscow when Dobrynin made a request on 17 October to meet with Nixon. To drive home the point of the signaling, Kissinger, in his 18 October background briefing paper for the meeting, reminded Nixon that "will be to keep the Soviets concerned about what we might do around November 1"; "our main concern with the Soviets at present is their support of Hanoi's intransigence and their heavy strategic weapons program." If Dobrynin raised the subject of military readiness measures, Nixon could say that they were "normal exercises" and involved "no threat."**

At the meeting on 20 October Nixon faulted Moscow for the poor state of U.S.-USSR relations, complained about the "hard position" taken by the Soviets on Middle East questions. Ignoring Dobrynin's attempt to move the discussion to trade, European security, and Berlin, the president played his China card with comments about "what we have done or are doing with respect to China." He concluded, "The only beneficiary ... of U.S.-Soviet disagreement over Vietnam is China." Nixon then expanded on his claim that the Soviet Union "has done nothing" to help regarding Vietnam. Following his and Kissinger's script, he reminded Dobrynin of his 1 November deadline and warned that "if the Soviet Union would not help us to get peace, the U.S. would have to pursue its own methods for bringing the war to an end."

After Dobrynin left Kissinger praised Nixon's performance to Haldeman, telling him that the president "had the guts of a riverboat gambler" and had "played it cold with D--giving him one back for each he dished out." Haldeman noted, however, that "K was, I think, disappointed that D had not come in with something specific." Kissinger's written assessment of the meeting reflected his guarded disappointment. He wrote Nixon that "the main point here is Soviet acknowledgment of our allusions to possible military actions," about which, he said, "they are concerned and your comments might just give them ammunition to use in Hanoi in lobbying for a more flexible position." Referring to



the readiness test, he advised, "In any event, it will be essential to continue backing up our verbal warnings with our present military moves." Nonetheless, Kissinger commented, he "could find nothing new in Dobrynin's presentation." Kissinger suspected that "In his published memoir a few years later, Kissinger confessed that he thought Dobrynin had succeeded in applying "reverse linkage" by extending a Soviet carrot that Nixon could not refuse: an offer to move up the opening date for SALT talks to mid-November.

Meanwhile, early in the morning of 20 October, hours before the meeting with Dobrynin, an incident occurred that suggested the risks of the White House's secret methods of decision-making. The "feedback" to the State Department that Haig had anticipated occurred, although it went no further; there were no leaks. During the graveyard shift, between 1:45 and 6:10 A.M., the watch officers of the State Department's executive secretariat received word from the Department's representative at the Pentagon National Military Command Center [NMCC] of "CODEWORD traffic of potential importance." The officers then received more details of a military exercise described in the Command Center's operational summary. Undoubtedly, the watch officers were learning of the heightened ground alert of the SAC alert force, among other readiness measures. Wondering whether a crisis was brewing, the watch officer discussed the information with staffers at the White House Situation Room and kept in touch with the NMCC. Possibly worried about the status of U.S. bombers, the watch officers soon learned that "all U.S. aircraft [were] accounted for." With senior officials entering the building by the end of the shift, the watch officers "decided to make no phone alerts unless firmer indication of crisis received."

The watch officers' reactions suggested the liabilities inherent in secret military alerts that were not coordinated with the various elements of the national security bureaucracy. While the watch officers made no "phone alerts", apparently they saw enough uncertainty in the situation to consider the option. Whether they took the information on the alert measures to more senior officials remains to be seen. If Secretary of State Rogers or his deputy Elliot Richardson had not already learned of the readiness test from Kissinger, they may have been briefed about it on the morning of 20 October. Nevertheless, the leak to the watch officers had no visible impact on Nixon's military signaling. Indeed, unlike the secret bombing of Cambodia, the readiness test was undisclosed for years. *R3 14 years*

While readiness activities remained secret at home, the Pentagon eagerly scoured reports for Soviet reactions to the alert in part because it could terminate some of actions, such as the Gulf of Aden operations, if the Soviets reacted to them. Moscow noticed the stepped-up naval activities in the Gulf of Aden; Soviet ships in the area reversed course and headed toward the Gulf. The Pentagon decided to continue the Gulf activities but kept assessing Soviet naval actions. No doubt the Chinese and the North Koreans noticed the naval operations in the Sea of Japan but only the Soviets reacted to them. On 21 October, several Soviet Badger medium-bombers flew in the vicinity, possibly on photographic or electronic intelligence missions. U.S. fighter and attack aircraft intercepted them and the Badgers flew a mile across the "Connie's" port bow. Overflights of U.S. naval activity were routine, so this was not necessarily a reaction to the readiness test as such, but Moscow may have wondered why the task force was lingering in the Sea of Japan. U.S. military intelligence could not tell, however, whether



the Soviets saw the naval operations in the Sea of Japan and the Gulf of Aden, much less any of the other readiness test activities, as part of a larger pattern.

#### Giant Lance

The instructions CINCSAC sent to SAC commanders on 23 October set the stage for an action that may well have encouraged the Soviets to think that something unusual was in the works in Washington. In keeping with his orders from General Wheeler, CINCSAC ordered his commanders to generate additional bomber and tanker aircraft, over and above those on ground-alert, to the "highest state of maintenance readiness." The nuclear-armed aircraft would have "adequate supervision" and undergo daily inspection, with tires rotated and engines and other systems checked at regular intervals. This action was to begin no later than 8:00 A.M. local time on 25 October and would last "through the first week of November and possibly longer."

Also to increase the intensity of the readiness test, CINCSAC instructed the commanders of the 22nd and 92nd Strategic Wings to implement the SEAGA "Show of Force" posture "with weapons" in the Eielson East orbit. "Implementation" or "I" Hour would at 19:13 Zulu time on 26 October. In keeping with the effort to avoid steps that could compromise secrecy, the bomber wing commanders were told that the "I" hour "will not be accompanied by [a] declaration of DEFCON 3," the usual procedure for a SEAGA "Show of Force" operation. As with maintenance readiness operation, the airborne alert could continue into early November. What SAC commanders did not know was that under White House orders SAC maneuvers would end sooner or later depending on when the Soviets were known to have reacted to the readiness ??

?? Several days later, SAC units began the next phase of the readiness test. The "maintenance generation" that began on 25 October assured that a large portion of the SAC non-alert bomber and tanker force--about 65 percent--was loaded with weapons, four or more bombs and missiles. Therefore, besides the alert force of 144 bombers another 170 or so B-52s were nuclear-armed. In addition, about 8:00 AM, on 27 October--twenty hours after the "I" hour--the SAC's 22nd and 92nd Wings began flying 6 nuclear-armed bomber aircraft continuously "over the frozen terrain of the Arctic." This was the first time that the Pentagon had authorized SAC to fly a nuclear-armed airborne alert since the January 1968 nuclear weapons accident at Thule air base. It would not be long before Soviet early warning systems detected this activity.

While SAC was implementing Giant Lance and the other alert activities continued, U.S. military intelligence searched for signs of Soviet reactions to the readiness test. The Pentagon kept monitoring specific actions, such as the stepped up activities at the East-West German border and a stand down of air patrol operations in the North Atlantic, in order to decide whether to terminate them, but found no evidence of a reaction. On 28 October acting JCS Chairman William Westmoreland informed Laird that there had been no specific Soviet reactions to those measures in the CINCEUR and CINCLANT areas. He also reminded him that the test would end on 30 October as previously scheduled. The next day, Westmoreland instructed the CINCs to end the readiness test activities at the first minute of 30 October GMT. Thus, after seventeen days of ground alert, stand downs, surveillance, heightened naval activity, and airborne alert, the JCS readiness test ended on schedule.

Years later, Secretary of Defense Laird recalled that the readiness test ended when U.S. intelligence picked up Soviet communications expressing "concern" about the alert



measures. That would have been consistent with White House instructions to end the test when the Soviets had reacted but so far no documents confirm this. Perhaps new intelligence became available after Westmoreland wrote to Laird. In any event, it appears that when Westmoreland decided to end the test, the elaborate alert measures had not prompted the Soviets into showing that they had noticed anything unusual.<sup>111</sup>

**Within days after the readiness test's conclusion, the CINCs responded to JCS requests for an evaluation. The picture was a mixed one, although somewhat positive. Officers at the commands with significant air elements uniformly saw serious problems. A CINCSAC cable drafted by Lt. Col. Richard McDonald of SAC's Current Plans branch indicated that that "a larger problem disclosed by the readiness test was SAC's shortage of combat crews." That problem, McDonald opined, "reduces the flexibility of option selections SAC once enjoyed and this at a time when we are searching for additional options." The implication was that until the crew shortage problem aggravated by the Vietnam War had been resolved, U.S. nuclear strategy would be shackled. Moreover, the stand down of training flights had a negative impact on SAC's ability to conduct its deterrent mission: it led to "gradual deterioration of combat ready crew proficiency." According to CINCEUR General Goodpaster, the "curtailment of flying [at USAFE] resulted in immediate regression in air crew proficiency," thus impairing overall readiness. Officers at TAC and CONAD had similar reservations. For example, TAC planners acknowledged that the stand down had permitted more ground training, but routine flying training "sustained severe setbacks."**

Another issue that concerned some of the CINCs was the disconnect between secrecy and military planning. According to a cable from CINCONAD, the lack of "background information" and a "description of the overall picture we were trying to create" hindered up decision-making and prevented the Command from making "more realistic" recommendations for additional actions. In the CINCSAC cable to the JCS, McDonald saw the same problem. Because the purpose of the readiness test was secret, SAC was "not fully capable of evaluating whether or not actions taken were appropriate." Among TAC fighter and airlift units but also at headquarters staff, there was "confusion" about the purpose of the readiness test: "Much conjecture resulted from everyone not knowing 'why.'" Not knowing that TAC was only one element in an elaborate signaling operation, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations observed that the stand down was "excessive for what was accomplished."

For all the problems, the CINCs saw significant advantages. CINCONAD saw an "excellent test of decision making processes at subordinate command levels" while the test period offered opportunities for training of ground crews and surface-to-air missile units. General Goodpaster noted that USAREUR found opportunities to exercise and improve "crisis management in real situations," while USAFE was able to improve the capability of units to "respond to wartime/emergency requirements." Although CINCLANT saw some disruptions caused by changes in ships schedules, he believed that the test was "beneficial from an operational readiness viewpoint." CINCSTRIKE saw "an excellent exercise of the efficiency and responsiveness of the command control system, down to unit level."

While military officers pondered the experience of the readiness test, Nixon and Kissinger may have puzzled over its impact. Although they had hoped that military pressures would jar the Soviets enough to facilitate a Vietnam "breakthrough", that



proved illusory. Conversations that Dobrynin held with Kissinger and Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson a few days after the readiness test ended showed that Moscow was not about to take the kind of steps on Vietnam that Washington would regard as helpful. To Thompson, Dobrynin frankly emphasized Soviet antipathy toward such U.S. pressures as Nixon's trip to Romania, linkage strategy on Vietnam, and statements of neutrality in the Sino-Soviet conflict. Although Dobrynin mentioned Soviet sensitivities over those issues, he did not bring up recent U.S. military moves; either he was not informed of them, was not free to mention them, or did not consider them significant compared to the other pressures. In any event, Dobrynin insisted that pressure would not elicit Soviet assistance on Vietnam: "the reaction in the Kremlin to tactics of this kind would always be the opposite of what [Washington] desired." To Kissinger, Dobrynin was frank in different ways: while warning against escalation he observed that Moscow had given up "illusions" that major progress in U.S.-Soviet relations was possible without a Vietnam settlement. Nevertheless, Moscow could not do much to help: "they could not get us out of a war into which we had gotten ourselves."

It is open to speculation whether the readiness test had an impact on Moscow's Vietnam calculations. Nuclear weapons are "slippery tools of statecraft" and Nixon and Kissinger could not be certain that the Soviets had read their message as intended; that is, if they had even seen the readiness test's larger pattern (although they presumably did). The simultaneity of the readiness measures and Nixon's October 20 "bad cop" message to Dobrynin might have appeared to Moscow as just a coincidence. If the Soviet leadership saw a connection, however, it very likely saw the readiness test as a bluff; ?  
 veiled threats of nuclear coercion against Moscow's Vietnam policy lacked credibility. ?  
 As one Soviet official put it many years later, with reference to the October 1973 alert, "Mr. Nixon used to exaggerate his intentions regularly. He used alerts and leaks to do this."

Whether the Soviets regarded the October 1969 alert with such equanimity is unknowable until Russian documentation becomes available. If the readiness test bore any risk of Soviet misunderstanding and overreaction, and bringing on the very confrontation that the strategy of détente was supposed to mitigate, such risks may have been inherent in the strategy's negative linkage aspects. That the alert was pitched at a level that Moscow would not regard as "threatening" reduced the possibility of an overreaction. The alert, however, was at a somewhat lower level of intensity than the White House may have preferred owing to Wheeler's opposition to SAC dispersal. Whether Nixon and Kissinger even saw that as a problem, however, is another imponderable until more documentation becomes available.

Nixon and Kissinger had timed the readiness test so it might jar Moscow into making concessions that Nixon could announce in his 3 November speech, but Nixon had no diplomatic coup to announce. All he could do was explain his past efforts for peace, attack antiwar opponents, criticize Hanoi's obstructions to a settlement, threaten "strong and effective measures," and summon the "Silent Majority" to rally behind his administration in support of the continuing struggle. Two days after Nixon delivered his speech, Dobrynin expressed Moscow's derision to Llewellyn Thompson, remarking that "he did not understand why there had been such a big build-up beforehand."

Nixon's initial efforts to link progress on Vietnam with SALT, among other negotiations with Moscow, had failed. The crude pressure of the readiness test, among



other attempts at linkage during 1969, did not persuade Moscow to facilitate a Vietnam breakthrough. In his 3 November speech Nixon mentioned that diplomatic contacts with Moscow had failed to produce "results." In early 1970, he acknowledged the point explicitly no doubt in an effort to put pressure on Moscow. Despite this failure, Nixon agreed to a date for the SALT negotiations that were a hallmark of détente. Nixon had found it necessary to modify the linkage strategy; rejecting arms control negotiations would have been too risky diplomatically and politically.

On Vietnam, the White House was left with troop withdrawals, negotiations, the possibility of triangular diplomacy, and brute force. Although Nixon had backed away from Duck Hook, escalatory options--such as aerial mining and strike plans designed to "isolate North Vietnam economically," which may have included the dropping of a nuclear bomb--remained under review at the White House. The nuclear option hinted by the readiness test remained on Nixon's mind, not as a threat against the Soviets, but on the menu of threats, if not plausible military actions, against North Vietnam. web?

**Nixon and Kissinger's calculated use of secret military pressure did not jar Moscow to any noteworthy degree, but that did not dampen their interest in the Madman Theory. Nixon and his advisers continued to believe that threats of force, military signaling, and alerts intimating nuclear threats were valid and necessary tools of diplomacy. Thus, the deployment of naval strike forces into the Eastern Mediterranean during the September 1970 crisis over Jordan and into the Indian Ocean during the 1971 South Asian war and the raising of alert levels of military forces during the October War in 1973, demonstrated Kissinger's willingness to use threats of force to deter Soviet military intervention in regional conflicts (even if the Soviets had no plans to intervene). As far as the present authors know, never again would Kissinger preside over a secret military alert; in October 1973 he was surprised that the DEFCON 3 alert went public so quickly.** HAK/me

Despite the scale and scope of the JCS readiness test, Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig made only indirect and cryptic references to it in their memoirs. Perhaps they thought better of mentioning this hastily improvised effort, either because they believed it was too sensitive and/or were embarrassed and realized that the Soviets had not gotten the message or had seen through their bluff. Conceivably Nixon and Kissinger did not care to revisit the desperation and wishful thinking that had encouraged them to think that the pressure of nuclear bomber alerts could jar Moscow into giving greater assistance on the Vietnam problem. Whatever they thought about the impact of the JCS Readiness Test, Nixon and Kissinger could not have easily forgotten such an extensive and problematic secret military exercise. Nixon's secret nuclear alert did not signify a crisis over China, but it did embody his belief in the principle of threatening the use of excessive force, which kept alive his hope of preserving American credibility in Indochina.